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ABSTRACT

One in a series of interviews with Native American poets, this interview with William Oandasan of the Yuki tribe of Round Valley, California, is conducted by an Abenaki poet, storyteller, and editor. Questions focus on Oandasan's literary style, his cultural heritage, and his development as a writer. Opening questions relate to the role of place in Oandasan's poetry, the use of the redwood tree as a symbol, and the theme of traveling while having a home to return to. Oandasan discusses childhood events that influenced him to become a writer. He describes early experiences with oral tradition including recollections of family members singing, telling stories, and relating events of the past. Discussion touches on writing experiences in elementary school, creative experiences with music and visual arts, and influential college teachers. Additional topics concern the poet's style and the influence of the haiku writers, oral tradition, and various schools of poetry and thought. Final questions explore the relationship of politics and poetry. (JHZ)

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THE POET IS A VOICE:
INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM OANDASAN
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PROFILE

By Joseph Bruchac

William Oandasan is a poet whose voice draws on both his Philippino and Native American heritage, but is rooted most strongly in the soil of California where his Round Valley forebears lived for countless centuries. His accomplishments over the 38 years of his life thus far include the publication of several volumes of his own poetry and being the founding editor of *A Publications*, an American Indian press publishing both chapbooks of poetry and a literary magazine from 1976 to present.

The interview took place in a small, almost bare office at the University of California which William Oandasan was using as a study at the University of California in Los Angeles where he was teaching Native American studies and editing the University's *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*.

OANDASAN: The first poem I'd like to read to begin this interview is the introductory poem to a chapbook of mine called *Moving Inland*.

The next poem is called "Grandmothers Land." It's the dedication poem to my book called *Round Valley Songs*, which received a 1985 American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation:

GRANDMOTHERS LAND

Around the house stood an
orchard of plum, apple and pear
a blackwalnut tree, one white pine
groves of white oak and willow clumps
the home of Jessie was largely redwood

blood, flesh and bone sprouted
inside her womb of redwood
for five generations
the trees now stand unpruned and wild
after relocating so many years before the War
the seeds of Jessie have returned

afternoon sunlight on the field
breezes moving grass and leaves
memories with family names wait
within the earth, the mountains
the valley, the field, the trees

JB: In almost all of your poetry I see a relationship between family and the natural world. Is this a correct perception?

OANDASAN: If you're asking me if I write consciously in relating family and the earth, I can't really say 'yes' to that. I think it's just a natural process or a part of my writing. It just comes into being. I feel that my early childhood, my association with family, probably closely relate to the natural surrounding. I grew up north of San Francisco, about an hour's drive. When I was a child that was a very rural part of California. But when I went to high school it became more and more suburbanized. It's now known as the northern suburbs. Yes, I think that the countryside, nature and my family are related deeply in my mind and so it comes out in my work. But I'm not thinking of it when I write.

JB: I notice also, frequently the image of the redwood. One of your books is called *A Branch of California Redwood*. What does that title mean?

JOURNEYS TO MYSELF

Here at Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico
On the dry, harsh and ancestral land
Of my spouse who is sleeping inside this
Adobe house of her mother's parents
I sit on a rough wooden porch beneath
A mid August moon, marking
These words on this new leaf.
But I have always been here, inside
Myself, a song of earth and sky.
My father sailed from Ilocos Sur,
Beside the ageless China Sea beyond sight.
On the lush northwestern coastline
Of the Philippine Isles. My mother was born
In Round Valley, the focus of her
Pre American culture, high
In the Coastal ranges of Northwest California
Near the redwoods where rivers
Rush down mountains to the sea. And I
Have journeyed across the Golden Gate, to Big Sur,
North to Vancouver and Kodiak, and resisted
The diabolic Vietnam War!
Like figures forming in the moving moonlight.
The far flung roots of my tree
Have been taking the shape of
A lone Pacific Salmon.

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OANDASAN: It has more meaning than the plain surface meaning. For one, the part of California I grew up in is known as the redwood region. Two, the redwood area or the Indian people there were often called the Redwood Indians in early times. It is also the state tree. I feel, too, it's sort of the appropriate plant symbol for my people because my people have lived in Round Valley for ten thousand years and are considered by most people the oldest people still in existence that live in California. Of course the great California Sequoia trees are usually thought to be the oldest life-form in California. That's not true any more; there's another tree said to be older. So, being a part of all that, myself being a branch of this great tree, not just of these historical and popular notions of what the redwood tree means in California, but sort of that universal symbol of the tree, the tree of life.

JB: That idea of relatedness, that you are not separate as a writer or a person from your people, seems true in particular of Native American authors.

OANDASAN: Yes, I think that out of all of those symbolic relationships that one should be included. I am a part of all of those meanings of the tree of life. A California citizen. I am also a member of the Yuki tribe. I am also a part of the earth from which the redwood itself comes. All of those symbols are very loaded with meaning. But what I think is really beautiful about it is that they all connect.

JB: I notice in your work the idea of journeying — and also being at home. The first poem you read is about journeys, the second speaks of going away and coming back.

OANDASAN: That seems to be a story or a recurring episode in my life, the travel. Travel to those places — Kodiak Island in the summer, winter in Vancouver. I have been to the Phillipines, to Hawaii. I have travelled across the country to Vermont, lived in New Mexico, been up to Seattle. But I always come back to home, to Round Valley, to northern California, the North Bay area. I like travelling; yet somehow not like many people seem to do — to cut themselves off from their source, to be drifting or in constant travel. I like travelling. I learn from travelling. But my connectedness to the earth, particularly Round Valley, and the

strong family ties instilled in me by both sides of my family are such that, even if I am across the country or in a different region, I am always at home in myself because I always feel that I know the way back.

JB: It seems as if the great body of Native American writing restates that very theme, of travelling, of love for travel, of learning from travel, yet of always having a home to return to.

OANDASAN: Yes. That is true. I can't cite the source, but I remember reading about an American Indian woman in California who had lived in innumerable places throughout her life. She never lived any place longer than a year. Yet she never left the traditional boundaries of her tribal land in all the time that she was moving. I feel maybe that's how I am. That's my feeling about things. I can travel anywhere on the globe, and as long as I can reach into myself and find my center, I'll always be able to find my home in Round Valley.

JB: A great deal has been written in recent years about literature and a "sense of place." Perhaps it is almost unnecessary to talk about a sense of place with your writing because a place exists with such strength that you hardly have to work to create it. It is there.

OANDASAN: I guess that is true to a large extent. Not that I'm consciously writing about place or not trying to write about place. But my sense of being, my self being centered, and the fact that a lot of the writing I've read or like, has usually been about places too, a particular locale or a people, relating to a land or a place . . . I think also it may have something to do with my sense of crafting a poem. You have to create the world for the poem, its environment or stage for its presentation. It can be an academic exercise sometimes, but I think it works best when that stage or sense of place comes spontaneously from your interaction with yourself and that place. Then the words just sort of flow out of that inner relationship. Then, after you've set the stage for a poem, it has its own environment or its own scene. From there you have a stage, so to speak, and the rest of the words come out. Either a message or a song or whatever the poet is trying to convey. A feeling; a thought.

JB: I want to go a bit further into the craft of

your poetry, what elements you put together to make a poem. But before we do that I'd like to go backward. I'd like to hear a bit about what influenced you towards writing and poetry in your childhood.

OANDASAN: Probably song and story were the most immediate things. I am thinking more in the oral traditions. I can remember my earliest memories of song as told to me by my father. I have vague memories about it because I was so young. It seemed it was in July because my folks and I had come home from an evening out with friends. I don't recall exactly what the occasion was. But when we got home I was so excited I wasn't able to sleep. I wanted my father to sing a song. I don't recall what the song was, but he carried me on his back, piggy-back, hobby-horse style, and he would sing this song, sort of dancing at the same time. So I know that song and words and dancing are something I found very pleasurable since I was very young. That's nothing uncommon. Children like to be sung to and like to hear stories. Another influence was my great-grandmother, my mother's grandmother, who was one of the last people in the tribe who actually spoke the language, our language. I remember her telling me stories and singing me songs. Then, at later age, I remember one of my mother's sisters was very fond of telling me stories, too. My great-grandmother would often take care of me because at that time both of my parents were at work during the day and would come back in the evening. During the day I was with my great-grandmother and often she would tell stories and relate events of the past. To me that wasn't history or biography, it was story. Then, when I was older, my aunt, who stayed with us for a year or so, would put the children to bed and she'd always tell us stories. So I think I was influenced before I could write to be interested in stories and songs.

In fact, before I started school, I was able to do simple writing and arithmetic. When I went to school and we started writing I was so precocious that I was the teacher's helper. I guess maybe that is also where I had my first emotional impulse or need to express myself. As amazing as it may sound, I had a crush on one of my classmates, but I was pretty shy. I am still shy about expressing my feelings. So I tried to write her a letter to explain how I felt. I don't know if I

was successful or not. Of course no copy of that letter exists. But I had another experience that sort of formed me or moved me more towards being a poet. The need to communicate in words, but in this case written words that expressed how I felt about this little girl I had a crush on. Later on, much later in school, about the 4th grade, I had a teacher who gave an assignment to write a story. I guess I was very fortunate that this teacher had a background in art. He had studied art at one of the universities in Oregon. I guess this was one of his first experiences in teaching. So it was more artistic, more of an workshop atmosphere for our class. We did learn reading, writing, arithmetic, but we had a lot of art. Storytelling, singing songs, more than you would usually get in school environment. So I wrote my first story. Actually it was a retelling of a story my mother had told me which her grandmother had told her. It's a fairly wellknown story, I think. At least in my experience it is. It's called "The Liver Man." The teacher was really impressed by it and so I was encouraged to write. Later on, the next year, the teacher must have heard that I should be encouraged to do creative things. She allowed me to spend a lot of time writing more stories. JB: What was the story "The Liver Man" about?

OANDASAN: It was a story told to children to keep them in at night and not go playing outside in the dark. If you did, the Liver Man will get you. It was kind of a spooky story. It was a simple line, as simple as that, a one-liner. But you can build a story about it and dramatize it. That's what I think caught the teacher's eye, the dramatization. Really it is just a simple children's story, but even the simplest poem, if it is done right, can be a little gem. I don't know how the teacher took it, but he was impressed and so I was allowed the next year to write stories on my own. I should add that in school I had a lot of problems adjusting. I might have been called a mischievous child. I didn't cause a lot of trouble, but I talked a lot and wanted to play around. I wouldn't come in at the end of recess right away. Nothing terribly bad, but not a good example. So I guess there was an unwritten bargain that I could do what I wanted if I was quiet and when I was writing stories I was quiet. Maybe it was done for two reasons, to

keep me under control and to encourage me to do constructive things.

JB: What is it that stories do? Storytelling is of such great importance to virtually every Native American writer. Why is that so? What are stories? What makes them work?

OANDASAN: That's a very complex question. On the broadest level it is a kind of entertainment, the telling of stories. But it is also a way of teaching lessons. It can also be very profound, especially stories of origin, stories of creation, stories that implement history in the telling. Stories can be all of those things.

Stories can also greatly involve the one who is telling. Some people have a real knack for the turning of a phrase. Others are very good at creating drama, dramatic effects. Some are very good at telling the story exactly the way it is known to be. These are some of the things I have observed in writing stories, in the writing of others.

Myself, I actually started this writing of stories as a sort of unconscious thing with regards to what a story was. All I was trying to do was tell a story and what I did evidently struck a bell for the readers. Teachers encouraged me. Some of my stories were published in school papers. Friends would tell me they liked the stories and ask me, "Where did you get that idea?"

JB: How old were you then?

OANDASAN: I was 9, 10 or 11.

JB: When did you then go on to poetry?

OANDASAN: About the end of high school. Between this time that I related and the end of high school there was a big blank in writing. Instead, I was into music. I played the saxophone in the junior high band. In high school I was into art. I liked doing pen and ink drawings and pastels. I was apprenticing at the school for a while in silk-screening. Then I decided to become serious about becoming a creative person. I was thinking about a career as an artist or a musician or a writer. Ironically, the reason I came to writing, and poetry in particular, was for the most unaesthetic reasons — financial. It cost quite a bit of money to buy an instrument in those days and to get canvas and fine paper and brushes, and paint, was expensive. I could buy a pen and a pad of paper very economically. So I started writing poetry about 16 or 17. Nothing that I was really satisfied with until I was about

19. At that time I had a first poem published. That was very encouraging and made me feel I had a chance here.

JB: In a school publication?

OANDASAN: It was a student publication at Santa Rosa Junior College. It was totally unexpected. I sent them a bunch of poems with no real idea of getting published. It was a real boost to my morale. So at the age of 19 I decided to seriously write poetry. From that time until I was about 24 I did a lot of reading in poetry, Eastern religion, haiku, Thoreau, Whitman. Just general reading, I wasn't guided and I followed whatever interest struck my mind. It was like going through a bookstore or library and reading titles and then reading what interested me. I still hadn't much direction, I guess.

JB: Were any teachers of writing important at this time?

OANDASAN: Yes. I think that D.L. Emblen was very important in my beginnings as a writer when I was at Santa Rosa. This was about the time when the Vietnam conflict started to escalate. I had just gotten out of high school. I didn't want to go into the army and I hadn't decided on a field to enter, so school was the next logical thing to do. I got a deferment from being drafted and I was taking a lot of general courses. I took math, a couple of courses in Algebra, English courses, things that wide in interest. Emblen had written a well-received novel in the 50's called Palamino Boy, sort of a child's novel about an Indian boy who goes to the top of a mountain and finds out who he is. He is also a poet. Actually I was referred to him by a teacher, David Harri-gan, the same faculty in English. Emblen was the first one to give me concepts like image, concrete images, details, sort of my basic introduction to the crafting of poetry. Up until then it was mainly inspiration, how I felt, letting emotions out, expressing yourself through words. In a lot of ways some of that poetry is very spontaneous and free-flowing. That was appealing to a lot of readers, but when he told me a number of things about my work — that I had a lot of abstractions, blanket statements about things — he showed me that these were not good devices for poetry. I realize now he was following Ezra Pound about being concrete, using detail, don't worry so much about the rhythms of meter but more the rhythms of thought. Very Poundian

kinds of things to say. Then I realized the kinds of stuff I was doing had a lot to do with the poetry I had read in high school, which was mainly Victorian poetry. The Victorians were very much into generalizations, universal statements. So I started out doing that. Emblen was the one who, because of his own training, influenced me towards the other way.

JB: It appears that your work now is certainly characterized by strong image, clear language, and precise and concrete detail.

OANDASAN: I think that was influenced by Emblen and the next step of my development — the reading of haiku. It was almost something out of the blue, reading haiku and being American Indian and an American poet. Emblen, like a great many other post World War I poets, was very concerned with order and with form, content. Of course, he's not so much into that now. He's just as contemporary as any other writer today. But he felt strongly that anyone who was a poet should learn at least one form of poetry. This was in the early to mid-60's. At this time two things happened on the West Coast, maybe across the nation. There was an interest in Eastern religion, Buddhism, Zen and Hinduism — the three that were pretty much in vogue where I was in Santa Rosa — and on this wave of orientalism came haiku. I know haiku has had quite a bit of trouble gaining acceptance in the U.S. literary scene, but I wasn't aware of that at the time. What I saw were little nature poems I liked quite a bit because I was also fond of reading the English Romantics, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, Blake. Of course the English Romantics were influenced by the German Romantics and they found very mystical qualities, supernatural qualities, in nature. So, I guess, combined with the fact I grew up in a fairly rural community, that struck some chords in my personal life. Learning the haiku form was very tempting because it is so short. As anyone who has tried to learn haiku knows, of course, that the simple, short form is deceptively complex and intricate and very hard in terms of discipline for a writer to express a thought in such a small amount of print.

JB: Where would you place your short poems or the short sections in your cycles of poems in relation to haiku? Looking at your poems and haiku, what would you say

about the two?

OANDASAN: I think the obvious thing is the compression and the association with nature. But when I was writing the Round Valley verses, which are four line poems, I wasn't trying to write haiku at all. In fact, I started writing them as much as 15 years later. I think what is characteristic of my poetry in general is just the short, concise, detailed statement. My more recent poems, some of them are going the opposite way, long-winded sentences, a lot of detail, a lot of words. But I am not sure where that is taking me, just something current now.

JB: It seems as if the influence of haiku was an influence which strengthened your line and your images. But in between the time of that first apprenticeship in haiku and the poems we see in your current books, something significant happened. I'd like to talk about that now in the light of a particular question. What does it mean to you to synthesize Native American oral traditions with the literary practices of the 20th century such as the Ezra Pound School of the Imagists?

OANDASAN: I don't think haiku alone was the only influence on the type of imagery that characterizes my work. I don't think oral traditions alone are, either. It is true that, because of the storytelling and the songs when I was young, the seed of the oral tradition was passed on to me. But I have found that in Whitman and a lot of the English Romantics the poems had a voice to them. It seemed that even if they weren't written to be read, transcriptions of oral statements, that there was a sense of voice to it. Now I realize that is what can be called the internal voice, the voice of the inner ear. I think the best oral traditions and the best written traditions sort of overlap in that way. As I say of A Branch of California Redwood and about Round Valley Songs, I wrote them to be heard and I want them to be heard as if they were written. To me that does happen, they are written and oral expressions. I find, as you said, the Imagist movement was important to me. I think I'm more conscious of their influence than of haiku. The haiku writers and Blake made me more aware of condensation, of conciseness and form.

JB: Mentioning Blake brings to mind another aspect of your poetry, the quality of vision, the relationship to higher issues.

OANDASAN: I'm not aware of doing that in my work, but I am aware of creating an image that you don't see with your eye. You have to see with the eye of the mind, the imagination. There are a lot of words for it. At the same time, it's synchronized with that internal voice. Somehow there is also a synthesis of the internal and the actual voice and what that eye actually can see. I haven't thought about that a lot. Perhaps for poets like Blake — and myself, if I do fall into that so-called Visionary school — that may be something just part of that territory and the poet's tools. A similar thing came up when a teacher once told me when I was going to school in Santa Cruz that there was a certain rhythm in the lines of my poetry. I wasn't aware that I was doing that. The teacher said, "Well, that's because poets have a way of saying things musically, anyway. You may not be conscious of it, but it's there. You wouldn't say it or write it that particular way if the words didn't fit together aurally in terms of the ear." Now I realize that this has a lot to do with the whole tradition and concept of lyrical poetry. For a while lyrical poetry to me was a kind of genre. Then when I discovered that the Greek lyre was the basis for the word lyrical and that there was a connection in Western history between music and poetry, then it became clear to me, very clear, what that teacher was trying to convey to me. Even though I wasn't aware of it, the poems I wrote were song-like.

JB: Your poems are also song-like in the way that the Ghost Dance songs were. One of your lines, in fact, "the people will rise again," seems right out of that particular feeling.

OANDASAN: That again has something to do with — thinking of things I am conscious of in my writing — trying to say it in the way I would normally say it. Now there are times when it may seem that the way I am saying something is not very "normal," as when I invert a sentence the way the Romantics might. But when I read the poem aloud it sounds as natural as someone else speaking. I am conscious of visual detail and being as concrete as I might be. Then after that the musical part or the oral part is more of a kind of sense of integrity. This is the way I would say it if I spoke it. The language takes over to some extent so that certain words sound better in certain

phrases. There are also limitations to the number of words you can use to say one thing. Every good writer should have a thesaurus, but the thesaurus has a limitation of how many synonyms there are. So there is a limit to the number of ways you can turn a particular phrase to express your idea. When you get in a particular situation like that, that is what I mean when I say the language takes over.

One of my very first poems, the first which was published, there were some questions brought to me before it was published. This word doesn't exist. But the sound of the word had a meaning. It was clear what the word probably meant even though no one had seen the word before. I was fortunate, as I said, to have Don Emblen there to help me. He made a case for the poem, as I remember. He said that poets are namers, they make up words if they have to. Of course mine was probably an extreme example of that. (laughs)

JB: I have heard your poetry described as being very politically aware. How would you define your own political awareness as a poet?

OANDASAN: I wish I didn't have to. (laughs) I don't think I can say anything any other person couldn't say. Politics are usually expressed in ideals, generalizations, abstract notions of what is the right thing to do. But when things get implemented, when political theory is put into practice, then people start to disagree. So, I believe in a lot of things people agree on, things that have the best interests of the largest number of people in mind. What is in the best interest of you, what is best in the long run for all things. But when you get down to specifics people disagree. I don't feel I am really that political. People who know me say that I am not very political. But when people see my poetry they think that I must be very political.

JB: I see a deep-rooted humanism in your writing. It goes with that pride about and connection to your Indian ancestry, an equal pride and connection to your Filipino ancestry, but there is a humanism which goes beyond while still celebrating those things.

OANDASAN: I think my politics are connected to that kind of humanism. I think that is what I am responding to in my poetry. Rather than presenting a political line, a

philosophy or theory, I am protesting against political actions which I find dehumanizing to people.

JB: That line of yours, "the ogre with one eye that sees the world only through blood-lines..."

OANDASAN: Right. It's more a protest against than presenting a policy. I am sort of distressed with people who have a vision of what is going to be, especially if they are out to change the world to suit their vision of it. I also know that people tend to let other people do those things. For me, I feel I want to be in control of my life. So I become aware of political issues. So I'm not one of those people who becomes a follower or one who supports a political theory or movement or party without having much control of it. At the same time I'm not interested in being a political leader but I am very interested in what political leaders have to say.

JB: This may not seem connected, but I think it is. The past is very important to you, also. In fact, a section of Round Valley Songs is called "The Past." But I do not think it is a past in the strictly Western sense of it being something that was and no longer is.

OANDASAN: That's right. In fact, if you notice in the writings in that section, "The Past," everything is written in the present tense. That is very conscious. Most of my writing is unconscious, but that is something which was done consciously. In fact, I wanted to write in a way so that an image of the past and an image of the present were put side by side. To present them in a way that a reader could make a connection and, in making that connection, for the reader and for the reality I was writing with, there is a continuity between past and present.

JB: Even a circularity?

OANDASAN: Yes. Things sort of turn into each other most of the time. There is a tension created between them. Without that tension they fall apart. You usually think of tension as things in opposition, in exact opposition, one being the past, one being the present. I was very conscious of showing that too, as a kind of political statement not just for my people but for people in general who do have a sense of cultural-national identity.

America, the United States, is still developing a cultural identity. The political iden-

tity has already been established. But the American culture as an extension of its people and its nationhood is still in its development. But for some of us, for most Native Americans if not all, that idea of culture and nation and people being related has already been established. By writing the poem in the past and calling it "The Past," at the same time in the present, I'm showing continuity there. Showing that Native Americans are still here today, the culture is here; the idea of nationhood, the identity of being Indian is, I think, a strong political statement. What makes it particularly strong, even though it is not stated in political terms, is that the Indian nations, peoples, cultures, still survive in spite of the fact that they've been constantly impacted since the beginning of the first colonization of the Western Hemisphere.

In the United States, and many of the Latin American countries too, it seems that the mainstream culture is constantly bombarding the native culture. One of the reasons for this goes back to medieval times when it was thought, for some reason, that Europe was the center of civilization. When they thought they discovered the Americas, they believed these cultures were uncivilized, outside civilization. So it was their religious duty to convert, to missionize the Indian peoples. There was, underlining this evangelism, an international competition for resources, of course, to provide wealth and power to the rulers of the colonizing nations in Europe. Or course nowadays everyone who has a sense of how relative a thing "civilization" is realizes that was a big mistake. All the extinct tribes and the fragmented tribal societies that have resulted because of this tremendous impact between two cultures, two world views, is an incredible mistake. Now people, under the term of "cultural pluralism," have been trying to support the idea of "indigenous peoples," even to the extent that it extends to Afro-American culture, and what is called "Chicano" these days. These and others are recognized as American cultures, too.

JB: Perhaps this is one of the reasons why your often-published poem "Acoma" is so popular. In that poem you present a picture of the ancient village of Acoma, the highway flowing by it, the present which seems to contain everything and the city of traditional people which endures in the midst

of that flow and that change.

OANDASAN: Yes, I think that is one of the poems I've written where everyone picks up on that message right away. That is a good poem for illustrating what I'm talking about. I think it is a powerful statement politically. Poetry can be powerful in political ways without being a political philosophy or a cry of protest. It can simply be an affirmation of something that stands outside and perseveres in spite of the dominant culture's attempts to subdue it, refine it, "civilize" it, USDA inspect it. To a large extent — and I'm not advocating resistance or pacifism — but sometimes by not even acknowledging the dominant culture is a way of resisting it, too. We were talking about that person who heads the group he calls "Truth Missions," the one who claims the Holocaust never happened. By resisting him you give him more attention and fuel for his mission. But if you just don't pay attention to him, he would have no one to talk to. Sometimes that works. Other times, of course, you have to pick up the sword and fight. To do that nowadays against the dominant culture seems suicidal in a lot of ways. So there are other ways to resist. Sometimes that is simply by surviving. Surviving is defiance. It is not giving in.

JB: Where does the poet, the Native American writer, fit into this equation?

OANDASAN: The poet is a voice. Poetry and the poet, at their best, can be the voice of the people. That often works best when the poet's personal interests are the same as the people's. I think that process for the poet to voice the people's will can be done without reverting to the lowest common denominator. There have been people who have said that the most democratic poetry appeals to the broadest number of people. I think that all poetry does, anyway. But I think there is more than writing esoteric poetry. People are becoming more aware that there is something in poetry which is not what we call mass media poetry and also not erudite scholarly poetry. There is a line somewhere on which I hope my poetry lies, in that it is intricate enough to make you reach out mentally and intellectually but at the same time it doesn't make you over-reach to the point where the poetry is more complicated than necessary. You can't write poetry that is so simple anyone could do it and you can't write it so that it is understood

only by a small, elite group of readers. How you can balance that is an art, not a science. One of the ways poets can do that is by associating with people, keeping up with the times, understanding the issues of the day, having an understanding of the historical processes that have led to these issues, and by identifying your own interests with the interests of the greatest number of people, the animals, the plants, the atmosphere, the whole earth. The poets who can do that the best are the poets who will be remembered the longest.

(This interview with William Oandasan, done by Joe Bruchac, the Abenaki poet, storyteller and editor, is one of a series of interviews with Native American poets which began with the aid of a Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellowship. Readers may remember the American Poetry Review interview with N. Scott Momaday as another of the pieces in this series. A collection of these interviews entitled SURVIVAL THIS WAY, discussions with 32 Native American poets, will be published in 1987 by the University of Arizona Press through the Sun Tracks Series.)